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History of U.S. Navy Hospital Ships

For more than a dozen years--from the end of the Vietnam era to the launching of USNS Mercy (T-AH 19) and USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) in 1986 and 1987--the U.S. Navy sailed without a hospital ship.

The history of the hospital ship has been one of ebb and flow. Rarely have hospital ships been maintained in peacetime. In the late 1970s, military planners saw a need for mobile medical assets to deal with so-called brush fire conflicts. The Iranian hostage crisis underlined the lack of such facilities, resulting in a hospital ship program that produced USNS Mercy and USNS Comfort. The war in the Persian Gulf reaffirmed the need for floating medical facilities. More recently, the turmoil in the Caribbean created by the exodus of Haitian migrants demanded Comfort's attention once again.

Initially, planners studied the possibility of acquiring and converting the luxury liner SS United States to a hospital ship, but concluded the ship would not be adequate. Then the Navy approached the U.S. shipbuilding industry, outlined its requirements for a hospital ship, including number of beds, surgical and laboratory facilities and overall space requirements, and solicited proposals. The final decision resulted in a contract award to the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company to convert two San Clemente class supertankers to U.S. Navy hospital ships. Tankers have the added advantage of a low center of gravity, which reduces roll, a benefit to patients and crew alike.

The conversions cost \$208 million per ship and took 35 months. USNS Mercy, formerly supertanker SS Worth, was accepted by Military Sealift Command on Dec. 19, 1986. USNS Comfort, formerly SS Rose City, was accepted by MSC on Dec. 1, 1987.

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Historic Highlights of U.S. Navy Hospital Ships

- Aug. 31, 1842--U.S. Navy's Bureau of Medicine & Surgery was created by Congress.
- Civil War--The first hospital ship, converted sidewheeler Red Rover, was commissioned on Dec. 26, 1862. Red Rover sailed the Mississippi River during the Civil War, treating 2,947 patients over a three-year period. She was sold at public auction in 1865.
- Spanish American War--USS Relief, converted passenger liner, was used by the U.S. Army as a floating ambulance and later turned over to the U.S. Navy. The Navy converted the 377-foot steamer SS Creole into a 200-bed hospital ship, USS Solace, in only 16 days. She shuttled sick and wounded servicemen from Cuba to New England until the war was over.
- World War I--The first USS Comfort (AH-3) and first USS Mercy (AH-4) joined USS Solace in the Atlantic Fleet. With a combined total of 700 beds, Comfort and Mercy brought back more than 3,000 casualties from Europe between November 1918 and March 1919.
- Dec. 28, 1920--The second USS Relief was commissioned. It was the first U.S. Navy ship designed and built as a hospital ship.
- World War II--The second USS Solace, a converted passenger liner added to the fleet just before World War II, was moored at Pearl Harbor on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941. Within 30 minutes of the surprise attack by the Japanese, Solace was treating casualties. USS Solace and USS Relief cared for soldiers and marines wounded in the island campaigns of the South Pacific. Later they were joined by the second USS Comfort and second USS Mercy. They took turns shuttling tens of thousands of wounded to a rear area and stateside hospitals.
- April 10, 1945--USS Comfort was struck by a Japanese Kamikaze plane at Okinawa. A total of 28 people were killed, including several of the ship's surgeons, along with six nurses and seven patients. Another 48 people were wounded, and there was extensive damage to the ship.
- Fifteen hospital ships saw duty in World War II. Except for USS Relief all were converted from liners, freighters and transports.

- Jan. 1950--USS Repose (AH-16), the last of the World War II hospital ships on active duty, was decommissioned. She was recommissioned six months later because of the Korean War.
- Korean War--For the first time helicopters played a significant role in medical evacuations. USS Consolation, USS Repose and USS Haven all were modified with helicopter landing platforms.
- 1957--All Navy hospital ships had been decommissioned.
- Vietnam War--USS Repose was commissioned for the third time in 1965 and outfitted with a 750-bed hospital. In four years in Southeast Asia, USS Repose treated more than 9,000 battle casualties and admitted a total of more than 24,000 patients. Repose was joined by USS Sanctuary in 1967. After more than 20 years of commissioned service spanning three wars, USS Repose left Vietnam in March 1970 and was decommissioned two months later. She earned 28 battle stars for action in Korea and Vietnam. USS Sanctuary remained in Vietnam, once spending a record 121 days on the line. She left Da Nang Harbor for the last time in April 1971 and was decommissioned in 1974. She was the first U.S. Navy ship to house a mixed male-female crew and was the Navy's last hospital ship until the current USNS Mercy and USNS Comfort joined the Military Sealift Command.
- Persian Gulf War--Both the Comfort and her sister ship USNS Mercy (in Oakland) were activated for the Persian Gulf war in August 1990. While in the Persian Gulf, Comfort treated more than 8,000 outpatients and admitted 716 patients.
- Haitian Migrant Operations--USNS Comfort had two back-to-back deployments to the Caribbean in 1994. The first was to lend support to U.S. efforts to process fleeing Haitian migrants at sea. The second was to serve as a combat support medical asset in support of Haitian contingency operations. During her first Caribbean deployment, Comfort provided medical support for the processing effort and hotel services for U.S. government personnel conducting the processing operations. In addition, the ship served as the platform for hundreds of embarked Haitian migrants each day. By mission's end, Comfort provided safe haven for more than 2,300 Haitian migrants.

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